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ABSTRACT

Three administrative approaches to organize the secondary school to provide services for learning disabled students are considered. In the first, a staff member assumes the role of case manager, coordinating communication and records from staffings, placement team meetings, conferences with parents, and individualized education program development. The Pupil Services Committee is suggested as a second approach, in which designated staff members examine individual needs of students. The committee takes referrals from teachers or other staff. The third approach recommended is modifying the duties of the learning specialist to reflect greater emphasis on diagnosis and consultation with regular class teachers and parents. The three strategies are explained to offer support services to learning specialists and others involved with learning disabled students. (CL)

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PRINCIPALS: UTILIZING THE SPECIAL EDUCATION RESOURCES WE HAVE

by Linwood H. Bean, Jr.

When we feel special educators are too few and learning disabled students are too many, before we submit additional budget requests we need to examine how we use all the resources available to us. The concepts developed in this paper are predicated upon five beliefs about public secondary schooling for learning disabled students.

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1. The majority[1] of educationally handicapped students in secondary schools are learning disabled, and by definition, have average or above average intelligence capacities.[2] We should test our organizational pattern to be certain we are serving the majority as well as providing for minorities.
2. It is important to focus upon the functions that comprise service to learning disabled students, not just on those persons employed to serve these students.
3. Virtually, all staff members in a school have responsibilities to serve learning disabled students. To the extent possible we are all special educators.
4. Learning Disabled students in secondary schools have all the problems of adolescence-plus a couple.
5. Mainstreaming extends to administrative and guidance tasks.

Three controlling ideas, all interrelated, deserve some discussion. They are 1. the case manager concept; 2. the pupil services committee; 3. the learning specialist job description. The first two issues help set a context for the learning specialist job description, which is the key to effective service for learning disabled students.

CASE MANAGER

We have heard the special educator's lament about the paperwork burden and administrative detail that comes and goes with each learning disabled student. Yet we tend to hire special educators for their expertise in

[1] SPEDIS, March 1, 1982, Special Education Section, N.H. Dept. of Education, indicates a range of 57% - 67% (18 year olds - 14 year olds, respectively) of all handicapped N.H. students are categorized learning disabled.

[2] For the purposes of this paper, learning disabled can also include those students who may be educably mentally retarded and who have sufficient social skills to function with the general school population.

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instructing students with special learning problems. The one, while important and necessary, frequently obstructs the other both in time and by energy drain. Placement team meetings must be scheduled and rescheduled; all placement team members must be notified. Staffings, different from the placement team meetings, have the same requirements. Diagnostic updates must be remembered. Progress reports from teachers need to be solicited and then read, understood, and communicated. Parents need to be called according to IEP requirements and whenever necessary. Parents need a person to call whenever they have a concern or something to share. Teachers must know of daily concerns such as need for makeup assignments when the student has been ill. Special arrangements and often delicate communications are required if the student has misbehaved seriously. And, of course, the interminable records must be kept. These and a host of other possible interferences can detract from the primary work of meeting the instructional requirements of an IEP.

The above tasks represent much of what a case manager might do. In schools which are fortunate enough to have adequate staff,(3) the tasks of case management can probably be incorporated into the daily routine of the learning specialist. The benefit is essentially one less person in the communication chain. If, however, the case load is excessive or the job description is extensive, the school might want to try separating some or all case manager functions from the job description of the learning specialist.

A case manager can be virtually any other staff member. One of the student's teachers can serve as the focal point for coordinating the efforts of staff. A guidance counselor or administrator can take on the specific duties for a specific student. A homeroom advisor might manage the case. A major benefit, in addition to enabling the learning specialist to concentrate on instructional issues, is that each learning disabled student tends to win another advocate in the school. In so doing the several other staff members have daily experiences with special education issues and develop a sense of ownership for the program. Initially, the plan does create an additional layer of communication in that learning specialists must be informed and consulted on most matters. After the case manager gains experience, however, the learning specialist becomes simply another contact point on the list of persons with whom the case manager must communicate.

(3) This writer suggests that a maximum case load for a learning specialist is 20-25 educationally handicapped students.

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Finally, the case manager can serve as the school's communicator regarding a student whose IEP may be networked with one or more agencies in the community. Most people outside the school are not knowledgeable about the internal nuances of the school's organization or individual specialties. A single contact person within the school can be very helpful to outside professionals and ultimately to the student.

PUPIL SERVICES COMMITTEE

The several staff members in a school who offer specialized services to students can meet regularly to network their efforts. To illustrate, let's examine the Pupil Services Committee as it works at Hanover High School, Hanover, New Hampshire. The committee is comprised of the school's two learning specialists, two counselors, one community/school counselor, nurse, alternative education director, intern counselor, Pupil Personnel Services Director (central office representative), reading specialist and building administrator. The building administrator serves as chairperson and a secretary acts as recording secretary on a permanent basis for the committee. The committee meets once a week for approximately an hour and a half. Agendas are formed at the beginning of each meeting with preference given to carry-over issues from previous meetings and issues considered by any member to require emergency action.

The subject matter of meetings is approximatley 90% student cases and 10% planning, information sharing, and evaluation. The basic rules are simple: any student in the school is eligible to be the suject of discussion. It is a meeting internal to the school. The customary requirement is that a student's name may be offered if the student seems to be having unusual difficulty with some aspect of being an adolescent in the school. Particularly eligible for discussion would be students with whom a staff member has been working and for whom that staff member feels the work has not achieved desired results. No student's name is to be raised unless the staff member expects some action to occur. The action may consist of as little as systematic observation of behaviors and as much as recommendation for parent conference, formal testing, and changes in the student's program. Usually one or more of the committee members are charged with specific tasks regarding the student's case, to report back their findings at a succeeding meeting. Often several

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committee members have either worked with or received reports from teachers about the same student. The pupil services meeting affords an opportunity for these several inputs to be shared and the collective wisdom of the group to come to bear on the student's case.

Both educationally handicapped and non-handicapped students are subjects of discussion and action in these meetings. In fact, out of these meetings some handicapping conditions are identified when perceived problems are translated into action which calls for diagnostic work. In some instances, students who had not been identified in elementary schools as learning disabled who had developed strong coping mechanisms for mild disabilities find that their coping mechanisms no longer sustain them as they reach the high school level of academic work. Reactions and frustrations stemming from such an experience sometimes manifest themselves in observable behaviors both in and out of classrooms. Reports of such behaviors may result in more intensive scrutiny.

At the first instance where a handicapping condition is suspected based on preliminary screening, a pupil placement evaluation team is formed utilizing appropriate members of the Pupil Services Committee, parents, and appropriate teachers. If a severe condition is identified, outside specialists may be asked to join. The placement team for each student is geared to the apparent needs of that student and includes staff members who know that student.

Referrals to the Pupil Services Committee sometimes come directly from teachers. Most often referrals come from the members themselves who are working constantly with teachers and students in the regular course of their responsibilities. If at some point the members of the Pupil Services Committee believe that diagnostic work is needed beyond the resources of the regular school staff, the request is channeled through the Director of Pupil Personnel Services, serving on the committee, to bring into diagnostic service a psychologist, pediatrician or whatever other specialist seems needed. Of course, parental consent must be obtained. In a situation where a student's school behavior appears to be consistently harmful to the student or to others over a period of time, the Pupil Services Committee can recommend to the Director of Pupil Personnel Services that the central office planning and placement team consider the student's case with an eye towards a possible outside placement.

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The work of the committee extends into the whole school by virtue of the members carrying out their tasks with colleagues, students, teachers, educational assistants, administrators and parents. In this way the learning specialist is part of a network of resources within the school offering his/her specialized talents to the overall needs of students. For example, the learning specialist who senses a need for vocational counseling for a client has a formal mechanism by which to raise the question and test the idea in much the same way a school counselor who believes a student needs more intensive therapy or an administrator who sees the same student over and over again for behavior problems can test their own judgments and actions and seek counsel and support.

The learning specialist is clearly not operating in a vacuum, simply taking his or her turn working with the learning disabled student. The specialist is part of a team effort created by the school structure.

LEARNING SPECIALIST JOB DESCRIPTION

The learning specialist must be able to concentrate on three areas. These are 1. working directly with the student and with any tutorial assistants who work directly with the student; 2. working with the student's teachers; 3. working with the student's parents.

Working With The Student - The learning specialist works directly with the learning disabled student in diagnosing the student's educational needs and prescribing what measures need to be taken. The diagnostic segment may in fact span a period of several weeks as the learning specialist becomes familiar with the learning strengths and weaknesses of the student. In this sense the learning specialist may, in fact, serve as a tutor, instructor, and diagnostician all in one. Once the need is clearly identified and a plan is in place, fully communicated with teachers, it is then the learning specialist's responsibility to be constantly evaluating work and redirecting energies as student progress is observed. Evaluation and redefinition of need, while required at least once a year, should be done whenever such a step is indicated. If the student needs tutorial assistance outside the regular classroom, it is the learning specialist's responsibility to organize that assistance. If the learning specialist has educational assistants available, it is the learning specialist who should be directing the assistants' work and examining progress reports from these tutors.

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In the secondary school much of the work might be related directly to course work since much of the student's efforts, similar to other high school students, is directed toward earning credit. The tutors' reports and the learning specialist's direct observations in classrooms are consolidated by the specialist and revised prescriptives can be developed as often as needed.

Working With Teachers - An equally large portion of the learning specialist's responsibility rests in working directly with teachers of learning disabled students. If a learning specialist has a case load of 20 and each student has five teachers, this creates a teacher-contact load of 100 for the learning specialist when we allow that each student/teacher relationship is a single contact. Of course, a single teacher may have several learning disabled students in classes and thus, the communication load can become somewhat streamlined.

Much of the learning specialist's time is spent in classrooms, primarily because that is where the students are if we really believe in mainstreaming. The work of a learning specialist here includes observing students, both the learning disabled students and the non-handicapped students, and their interrelationships in the classroom setting.

The specialist might work directly with individual students or small groups in accordance with the regular teacher's plans. The learning specialist may assume an active or passive role in the classroom depending upon the nature of the work, the nature of the learning specialist's task, and, most importantly, the receptivity of the teacher. In some instances, where the learning specialist and classroom teacher have developed a close working relationship, it may be desirable for the learning specialist to give feedback to the classroom teacher regarding the learning specialist's observations of learning disabled students' learning behaviors during any particular class period.

Learning specialists, with a bank of specialized materials, can often assist a teacher in supplementing regular classroom materials for learning disabled students. If this is done with a teacher's knowledge and consent, is presented as a help effort for the teacher as well as for the students, and is coupled with frequent conversations about the effect of classroom expectations and materials adjustments, these contacts constitute a major component of inservice work with each teacher. It can encourage the secondary school teacher to move towards becoming the special educator we should all be.

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Formal inservice work is the other component of the learning specialist's job description as related to teachers. Showing films, sharing articles, and making short presentations at faculty meetings serve to raise consciousness among all staff about the needs of educationally handicapped students. More specific work is targeted to individual teachers as indicated above or in the case of most secondary schools towards specific departments. The learning specialist, in conjunction with his/her supervisor working with department coordinators, can work specifically with two or three departments over the course of a school year, utilizing department meetings for the inservice work. This approach allows the teachers and the specialist to focus on issues specific to the subject matter and problems of a given department. It also causes staff members with strong subject matter identification to know that all members of their department are working on special education issues. Those few staff members who may have been resistant to special education techniques are exposed to ideas in the comfort setting of their own department and see their colleagues working with the ideas. They have neither the solitude of their own province (classroom) nor the anonymity of being in a large group faculty meeting. They are, in fact, subject to the scrutiny of their most knowing critics, their peers. Depending on staff turnover and progress made, a learning specialist may wish to do a refresher session with a given department each year after an initial year of fairly intensive inservice work.

Working With Parents - The learning specialist has the responsibility also to educate parents of educationally handicapped students to be supportive of the school's efforts on behalf of the student. In many cases this means soliciting the parents to be of assistance by not attempting to duplicate the work of the school but rather to complement the school's efforts in their comments and conversations. In some cases a parent may supplement the school's activity, especially where the parent and student have a good working relationship and where extra time spent on specific tasks can benefit the student. This writer's experience, however, suggests that many adolescents have separated their work in school from that in the home and tend to view even cautious interest of parents as interference in their school matters. Part of the learning specialist's job is to help the parent and student sort out the school issues. The overly anxious or eager parent, however positive the intentions, can easily sabotage the student's motivation by assuming parental ownership in what the student learns.

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One effective device used by the learning specialist is the parent support group. Parents of learning disabled students are invited to meet in the evening at school with the learning specialist and possibly the specialist's supervisor. Short presentations can indicate to the parents what the day is like for their students in the school and what some of the difficulties can be for learning disabled students. In so doing, parents see they are not alone with whatever frustrations they experience. They frequently draw from each other good suggestions for working with their own children. These meetings might occur only two or three times during the school year for general purposes, or more often if a group addresses specific topics in depth.

In summary, we need to organize the learning specialist's talents and energy so that they serve the learning disabled student as much as possible in the mainstream of regular students. In order for this to happen, the adults who most affect that mainstream, the student's parents and teachers, are as much in need of regular, direct assistance, as is the learning disabled student. Because the learning disabled student is also vulnerable to all problems of adolescence, the learning specialist should serve as an equal partner within a network of specialized support services available to all students. In this capacity the learning specialist can martial specialized support for the learning disabled student while offering learning specialist talent and insights to others. Depending upon case load and job description, the learning specialist may need some help. That help might come in the form of case management assistance. Finally, the functions of case manager, pupil services committee, and learning specialist are interrelated; these must be kept in mind when organizing the school's resources to serve all students.

Biographical Data

Linwood H. Bean, Jr., is Associate Principal of Hanover High School, which serves both Hanover, New Hampshire, and Norwich, Vermont, in the Dresden School District, the first interstate school district in the country. Mr. Bean graduated from Dartmouth College with a B.A. in History and earned his M.Ed. in Administration and Supervision at Plymouth State College of the University of New Hampshire system. After his undergraduate years he served with the United States Biathlon Unit. He has taught social studies and English at both the junior high and high school levels, has coached varsity skiing and soccer, and for the past twelve years has worked in a variety of administrative and supervisory roles at Hanover High School, including coordination of special education services.

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